Migration as a Kairos moment for Protestant-Muslim dialogue

Muslim-Christian Dialogue and Migration

Joshua Ralston

Abstract

This essay examines how the migration crisis of 2015 presented churches in Europe with a 'kairos' moment that demanded fresh theological reflection on Islam and social action alongside Muslims. By exploring how the initial comments and public pronouncements by churches in 2015 focused very little on Islam and Muslims, I argue that churches failed to challenge political appeals that presented Christendom as locked in a recurring battle with Islam. Through an examination of three Protestant church documents published in 2018, the essay goes on to show how more churches began to challenge populist rhetoric and also engage with the challenge of Christian-Muslim dialogue and the call for fresh Christian theological engagements with Islam.

Biographical Note

Joshua Ralston is a Reader in Christian-Muslim Relations at the University of Edinburgh and founder and director of the Christian-Muslim Studies Network. He is the author of *Law and the Rule of God: A Christian Engagement with Shari'a* and has published numerous essays and book chapters on Protestant theology, Christian-Muslim dialogue, and political theology.

Address:

New College
Mound Place
Edinburgh EH1 2LX
United Kingdom
Email: joshua.ralston@ed.ac.uk

In the summer of 2015, European political and media discourse increasingly focused on the refugee crises caused by the Syrian war, as well as the ongoing turmoil in post-invasion Iraq and Afghanistan. Years earlier, millions of people had been forced to migrate from their homes and were living in refugee camps or in urban centres in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. However, public and political attention on the severe challenge of forced migration was minimal until a large number of these people began to move into Europe to seek asylum and a new home. The migration crisis was suddenly both the most pressing political question and the dominant news story across Europe and North America. The initial responses to the movement of people were often sympathetic, drawing attention to our common humanity and the demands of political care enshrined in international law.[1] The heart-breaking image of Aylan Kurdi's dead body on the shores of Turkey quickly became a symbol of pain and tragedy of migration, eliciting compassion and calls for change.

Very quickly the political mood and social reality in Europe shifted. The Paris attacks of 2015, as well as other acts of violence in Berlin and Brussels, were connected, however tenuously, with refugees and immigrants. Similarly, the accounts of sexual harassment during the New Year's celebration in Cologne presented an image of refugees as a sexual threat. The

[1] Most prominently the United Nations' 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refuges and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees.

original framing of migration as a humanitarian crisis transferred quickly to a debate about cultural belonging and religion, with refugees depicted as Muslim others who may be incapable of residing in Europe. Nicholas De Genova notes how the "figure of the refugee—so recently fashioned as an object of European compassion, pity, and protection—was refashioned with astounding speed" into the Muslim other who is a potential terrorist or criminal.[2]

There have been numerous academic studies that have examined the important function of rhetorical appeals to Christianity and Judeo-Christian values in the calls to protect Europe from immigrants, especially Muslims. Rogers Brubaker argues, for instance, that appeals to "Christianity have become increasingly central to national-populist rhetoric in the last decade."[3] According to his analysis, the turn to Christianity is intricately tied up with Islam. Numerous nationalist populist parties in Western Europe have begun to construct a Christian-secular identity politics to resist the "civilizational threat from Islam."[4] Christianity here does not function primarily as a set of religious practices or theological beliefs; in fact many who argue for this Judeo-Christian-Secular identity neither practice nor believe in traditional Christianity. Instead, Christianity serves as one central part in a broader imaginary of identity and civilisation that supports conceptions of freedom, gender equality, and liberalism. Christianism, as Brubaker names it, is juxtaposed with a depiction of Islam where freedom, gender equality, and political secularism are an impossibility.

While it may be tempting to dismiss these uses of Christianity as running against the teachings of the Church and the public statements of churches to care for migrants, this would be too simplistic. These ideas have a much longer lineage in the statements of theologians, practices of everyday Christians, and public rhetoric of Latin Christianity stretching back to at least the Crusades. Moreover, current Christians leaders and politicians from Viktor Orban and Archbishop Péter Erdö in Hungary to Swedish ministers have also interpreted the migration crisis as a sinister Muslim threat to Christianity and Europe. [5]

Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, SJ argues that socio-political and economic crises present the church with a kairos moment, where God calls the community to respond with acts of faith and creativity. "A church that opts to engage" the socio-political and economic issues of its context "emerges as a church on a mission," moving "from crisis to kairos."[6] In an article written over three years ago, I argued that socio-political realities of migration and its public backlash present the churches in Europe with one such inter-religious kairos moment, demanding interfaith engagement. The challenge facing Christians in the West in responding to the migration crisis is in part to discover frameworks for Christian-Muslim engagement that resist presenting Christendom as locked in a recurring battle with the dar al-Islam. However, at the time the loudest theo-political reactions to the phenomenon of migration in

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[2] Nicholas De Genova (ed.), The Borders of 'Europe': Autonomy of Migration, Tactics of Bordering, Durham: Duke University Press, 2017, 17.
[3] Rogers Brubaker, "Between nationalism and civilizationism: the European populist moment in comparative perspective," Ethnic and Racial Studies 40 (2017),1191-1926, here 1198.
[4] Brubaker, "Between nationalism and civilizationism," here, 1193.
[5] Johanna Gustafsson Lundberg, Christianity in a Post-Christian Context: Immigration, Church Identity, and the Role of Religion in Public Debate," in Ulrich Schmiedel and Graeme Smith (eds.), *Religion in the European Refugee Crisis* (Palgrave, 2018), 123-124.
[6] Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, From Crisis to Kairos:The Mission of the Church in the Time of HIV/AIDS, Nairboi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005, 18.

Europe have been those that return to long standing tropes of inherent difference and cultural rivalry.[7]

This brief essay will reflect on one sign of hope in Christian-Muslim relations in the context of migration in Europe, especially in light of the increasing political restrictions against immigration and the rise of right wing nationalism. Hope can be found in the numerous pronouncements and ecclesial statements by Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox churches calling for social care, political engagement, and church action to support migrants and refugees. While the initial pronouncements in 2015 focused very little on Islam and Muslims, as the situation continued and public rhetoric increasingly demonized Muslims migrants, more churches began to engage with the challenge of Christian-Muslim dialogue and to call for fresh Christian theological engagements with Islam.

In the summer of 2015 and into the autumn, churches and ecclesial leaders responded to movement of migrants into Europe with acts of hospitality. Churches were turned into makeshift processing centres. Christian aid groups were present on islands in Italy and Greece to welcome and aid the humans seeking refugee in Europe. Nearly every major church issued public pronouncements that called for care for migrants. Pope Francis, who had been a champion for immigrant and refugee rights for years before, demanded parishes across Europe welcome people seeking shelter.[8] Orthodox churches in Western Europe referenced their own histories of migration, and Patriarch Bartholomew insisted that Europe open its arms to people seeking new opportunities and life, using his Christmas sermons to connect Jesus' own birth and flight to Egypt with the current realities in Turkey, Syria, and Europe. Numerous Protestant denominations and national churches from Hungary to Scotland published public statements pointing to the biblical call to care for the migrant.

The documents were important, especially as they drew attention to the biblical calls to care for the least of these (Matt 25:40) and to treat the stranger as a citizen (Lev 19:34). However, the increasing fear of Muslims and demonization of migrants demanded more from churches. Even as Christianity was increasingly invoked as a tool against Muslims by the far-right and other politicians, many churches failed to challenge these claims directly but instead continued with general appeals to ethics or shared humanity. True signs of hope meet the challenge of the society and call of God directly. It is thus all the more urgent for Christians in the West to muster both the courage and humility to begin to risk genuine engagement with Muslims and to move beyond the fear and recrimination that has dominated most public and ecclesial debates. Until Christians confront our long and uneasy relationship with Muslims, we will remain caught between the dominant motifs of fear and nostalgia that cling to a past Christian Europe or simplistic accounts of tolerance that calls for a generic love of neighbour but fails to address genuine difference. As such, the earlier church statements regarding care for the stranger needed to be advanced to include more indepth reflection on

[7] Joshua Ralston, "Bearing Witness: Reframing Christian-Muslim encounter in light of the refugee crisis," Theology Today 74 (2017), 22-35, here 26.

[8] For instance in his first apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium,* Pope Francis noted how "Migrants present a particular challenge for me, since I am the pastor of a Church without frontiers, a Church which considers herself mother to all. For this reason, I exhort all countries to a generous openness which, rather than fearing the loss of local identity, will prove capable of creating new forms of cultural synthesis. How beautiful are those cities which overcome paralysing mistrust, integrate those who are different and make this very integration a new factor of development." *§210*

Christian-Muslim relations as well as the specific legal, political, and social challenges in Europe and within each country.

Given my own location as a Protestant theologian, I will turn to three such documents from 2018 that Protestant churches in Europe issued, each calling for increased engagement with Islam and Christian-Muslim dialogue.[9] These mark a shift from 2015 when the churches' public statements focused primarily on care for the stranger in the abstract without any specific focus on Islam or Muslims. The 2018 documents evidence stances that engage more concretely with Muslims and see churches challenging the rising xenophobia and anti-Muslim rhetoric in Europe. They also show how the socio-political and cultural challenges of migration pressed Christian theology and churches to think afresh about Islam.

The first comes from the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) European meeting in Budapest, Hungary in April of 2018. The WCRC in Europe includes 40 member churches in 29 countries that represent around 80 million people coming from the Reformed, Congregational, Presbyterian, United, and Waldensian Community. The 2018 gathering in Budapest occurred a few days after the Hungarian election, which provided a resounding majority to the right wing populist prime minister Viktor Orbán, himself a member of the Reformed church in Hungary. The campaign relied heavily on anti-migrant rhetoric and presented Orbán as a protector of Hungary and broader Christian European values. Within this context, the churches gathered to reflect on the work of its task force on migration in Europe and to hear recommendations about future work.[10] In addition to calling for more diaconal care, social integration, and advocacy, the WCRC called attention to the importance of attending to Christian-Muslim relations, both politically and theologically.

Politically the document noted how Christianity and Islam were deployed in anti-migrant discourse. "The rise of many far-right parties that praise European culture and Judeo-Christian values do so in the name of rejecting human beings who are seeking refugee or a new life…. The WCRC and its member churches have continually issued public statements and raised alternative voices to these."[11] In response, the WCRC asked for more theological engagement with Islam and an increased role for Christian-Muslim dialogue. The main action point, which was unanimously approved, was for the churches "to improve Christian-Muslim relations by increasing cooperation and dialogue with the Middle East partners of the WCRC, and also learning from the experiences of other WCRC European partners in their cooperation with Muslims."[12] While the WCRC's statement issued a call for increased Christian-Muslim dialogue and fresh theological reflection on Islam, it did not offer much of it. Two documents issued later in the same year in Germany do move in these directions. The first presents a more political reflection on Christian-Muslim dialogue, while the second moves in a more distinctly theological direction.

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[9] Given the Catholic Church's long commitment to engagement with Muslims since the second Vatican Council, the Church has a much longer tradition of theological reflection upon Islam and dialogical engagement with Muslims.

[10] I served on this task force from 2016-2018 along with ministers and lay leaders from Italy, Sweden, Greece, Hungary, and Germany. As the lone academic theologian, I primarily drafted the document with input from the rest of the steering committee, especially the sections highlighting national work.

[11] "When God recommends guest and sojourners to them…": The Church's Mission and Work in the Context of Migration, 29-30 https://www.wcrc-europe.eu/%2C%2CWhen_God_recommends_guests_and_sojourners_to_them_...-20219-0-0-26.html

[12] Ibid., 32.

In September of 2018, the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD), a confederation that includes Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches in Germany and thus represents the majority of Protestants in the country, issued a new position paper on the urgent need for Christian-Muslim relations and fresh political theological reflection on Islam. The document opens by recognising the co-humanity and shared citizenship of Christians and Muslims in Germany, grounding this in the German basic law and an account of the Holy Spirit's presence in the world. The church goes on to confess that the Protestant churches in Germany struggled to "recognise religious plurality," but now affirms religious diversity in the country and seeks to treat "Muslims with respect and appreciation, regardless of the different claims of revelation and truth between Christianity and Islam."[13]

The most promising aspect of the document is the way that it calls for a spirit of non-hostile recognition of difference within the public square. Challenging ardent secularists who envision the privatisation of religion and some Christians who seek financial support from the government and religious freedom only for themselves, the churches support a dynamic political pluralism grounded in mutual respect, justice, and freedom. For the EKD, the secular state of Germany is one that is religiously neutral and affords political equality before the law to all religions. Given this legal tradition in Germany, especially towards the Catholic and Protestant communities, "The Evangelical Church is keen to ensure that Muslims and their organizational forms in Germany are able to work freely and to participate in the opportunities for development in the public square."[14] To accomplish this demands openness and adaptability from the German national government, the 16 *Bundesländer,* from churches, and also from Muslim communities. It honestly names how segments of society, including church members, harbour suspicions against all Muslims and question their presence in Germany and Europe. The churches note the reality of violence carried out by Muslims, but warns "against hastily coming to general and general conclusions where differentiation and differentiation are required." [15] There is much left unsaid in this document, but we begin to see the sketches of a vision of European Christianity that both values its unique political contributions and history, but also seeks to extend these social privileges outward to include others, especially Muslims.

A more intentionally theological document was published in the Autumn of 2018 by the *Evangelische Kirche im Rheinland*, a United Protestant church consisting of both Lutheran and Reformed traditions. [16] The position paper was an advancement of an earlier document from 2015 that initiated engagement with Muslims and sought a theological basis for dialogue. In addition to a number of important ethical claims focused on the church's rejection of racism, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia, the majority of the document focused on theological and scriptural reasons for dialogue with Muslims. The fact that the church wrote and debated a fairly nuanced theological statement on Islam illustrates the ways that the situation of migration in Europe in general and in Germany more specifically served as a dramatic impetus for fresh theological engagement.

In the document, the church sketches out the contours of a Protestant theological engagement with Islam, one that draws on scripture, the Protestant tradition, and also Vatican II, while

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[13] Positionspapier der EKD zum christlich-islamischen Dialog https://www.ekd.de/positionspapier-der-ekd-zum-christlich-islamischen-dialog-37797.htm
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Für die Begegnung mit Muslimen. Theologische Positionsbestimmung, http://www.ekir.de/www/downloads/DS30FuerdieBegegnungmitMuslimen.pdf

learning from its previous failings in Christian-Jewish relations. Two central theological ideas stand out. The first is how it locates Islam within the broader biblical tradition, albeit not necessarily in the Old and New Testament as such. Islam is presented as part of a Scriptural and Abrahamic trialogue and thus Muslims have a special relationship with Christians. This relationship is analogous to Judaism, although not the same. Jews and Christians share and debate the Hebrew Bible, while Muslims do not and look to the Qur'an as the revelation of God. Islam is thus secondary to the constitutive relationship with Judaism, but it remains important and requires distinct areas of dialogue and theological reflection.[17] By making this distinction between Christian-Jewish and Christian-Muslim relations, the church does not intend to exclude Muslims from the biblical traditions. Instead, the authors affirm a broader shared heritage, especially related to a confession of the one God and common figures like Abraham, which link Muslims and Christians.

The second theologically vital component of the document is its focus on Jesus Christ, not as a means to reject Muslims or Islam, but as grounding for dialogical exchange. This is justified in a few ways. First, the second section begins by categorically stating that "Christians who hold fast to their commitment to the truth of Jesus Christ can also perceive in Islam, God's history with human beings."[18] The fact that Christians and Muslims disagree over the salvific importance of Jesus, as well as his relationship to the divine nature, is not sufficient reason to reject Muslim claims to worship the one God. Just as Jesus engaged with people from a variety of perspectives and contexts, so too should Christians. Moreover, the church interprets Romans 9 as stating that God's activity extends beyond the knowledge and confessions of the church. Building on these scriptural and theological groundings, the document concludes that Christian-Muslim dialogue is a church mandate and one to be carried out in a spirit of openness and faith

The theological questions that Islam presents to Christianity cannot be ignored, but must be engaged in ways that attend to history, scripture, and the contemporary reality. Rather than rely on olds tropes that demonise Muslims or view Muhammad as religious imposter, the church calls for serious theological consideration of Islam from a Christian perspective. In so doing the church affirms its own central commitments to Jesus Christ, but also recognises God's presence with Muslims in the history of Islam. The document is far from a fully developed theological reflection on the many thorny theological challenges of Christian-Muslim dialogue, but it does represent an invitation for further reflection and debate on how to understand the church's dual commitments to faith in Jesus Christ and openness to God's active presence with Muslims.

Taken together, these three documents, as well as others written over the past five years, illustrate how the questions and challenges of migration are pressing Christians to engage more concretely with Muslims. Over the last years, numerous sites of hope can also be discerned through the actions of individuals and communities. These less visible acts of hospitality and social resistance find Christians, Muslims, and other people of faith or no religious faith enacting the truth of our common humanity, defying death dealing policies, and offering an alternative to the rhetoric of an inherent clash of religions. German pastors and priests are using centuries old laws about asylum to protect refugees from deportation. Catholic and Waldensian Christians are gathering together in Lampedusa to mourn and

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[17] Für die Begegnung mit Muslimen. Theologische Positionsbestimmung, 4. http://www.ekir.de/www/downloads/DS30FuerdieBegegnungmitMuslimen.pdf

[18] Für die Begegnung mit Muslimen. Theologische Positionsbestimmung, 5.

lament the deaths of human beings in the sea, all while calling for new just laws and safe corridors. Syrian Muslim who have been resettled in the United Kingdom are volunteering in hospitals to help during the Covid-19 pandemic. These acts of inter-religious human solidarity advance the public statements of the churches and cultivate human dignity by calling forth a "dangerous memory" that disrupts the political fixation on citizenship status, borders, and political management. It is in these lived realities, which the public statements of churches can only witness to, that we see further signs of lasting hope grounded in human solidarity.

Nosta Aetae §3's call for Christians and Muslims to move beyond the rivalry and violence of centuries and "to forget the past" and work for "social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom" remains a prophetic call to Christians, both Catholics and others. Protestant theologians and churches in Europe have lagged behind the Catholic church in engaging seriously with both Islam and Muslims. The last few years have seen Protestant churches in Europe increasingly take up the Vatican's call for engagement. And yet the invitation to forget the past seems overly optimistic, when the past remains a vital force in the political, social, and theological imaginary of public, political, and popular discourse. For instance, the Ottoman advance on Vienna and conquests of south-eastern Europe have been invoked by politicians in Hungary and right-wing nationalist movements across Europe as justification for closing borders and treating all Muslims, be the citizens or immigrants, with suspicion. Those Christians who wish to resist the rise of Christianism must not simply forget the past, but engage with it through honest evaluations of our failings, repentance for our sins, and thereby engage the work of theological repair. Only then, will Christian-Muslim dialogue be able to sustain the shared work of social justice and moral welfare. There remains much work to be done, but the theological and ecclesial reflection examined in this essay are signs of hope that might seed an alternative future for Christian-Muslim relations in Europe.